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# Media Manipulation and the Politics of Polarization in India

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**ABSTRACT:** Indian TV news channels serve a fresh daily dose of polarizing hyper-partisan content and when the hate spewed on TV manifests through a social media trend #coronajihad, one begins to wonder if people are divided along communal lines due to the content they consume or is the content being crafted to cater and reinforce their biases for TRP gains? Media manipulation in India is becoming increasingly evident. It caters largely to the country's majoritarian beliefs and biases. This phenomenon is particularly evident in high-profile Prime Time debates broadcast on popular 24/7 news channels, serving as an excellent example. The vocal advocacy of a particular political ideology and narrative is common among them. This phenomenon has resulted in the marginalization of diverse opinions. In this paper, we delve into the complex dynamics of Media Manipulation, shedding light on how a carefully crafted ideological media ecosystem creates the perfect conditions for the spread of propaganda. Media manipulation is a complex phenomenon that involves the strategic use of communication channels to shape public opinion and influence people's beliefs and behaviors. In the context of contemporary politics, media manipulation has been particularly evident in the construction of right-wing media ecosystem which involves a combination of media outlets, including television networks, radio stations, websites, and social media platforms, that promote a specific ideological agendas and narratives, often with the intention of polarizing and radicalizing audiences. By presenting a skewed version of reality, media outlets aim to galvanize their audience into taking specific actions, such as supporting particular politicians, political ideologies, or participating in protests, programs or rallies. It also works towards legitimizing and solidifying their existing biases. Not only does this manipulation threaten the credibility of news sources, but it also makes it more challenging to find common ground in politics. This paper explores the media manipulation techniques employed in building an ideological media ecosystem, its intended impact, and the consequences of such manipulation.

**KEYWORDS:** Polarization, Media manipulation, Social media, Corona jihad, Propaganda, T.V channels, Media influencers.

## I.INTRODUCTION

Richard Laitinen and Richard Rakos (1997) provide a critical view of contemporary propaganda, defining it as "*the control of behavior by media manipulation.*" Jowett and O'Donnell define propaganda as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2014, p. 6). Media manipulation, according to Data & Society, is the "effort to exploit technical, social, economic, and institutional configurations of media to catalyze social change, sow dissent, and challenge the stability of social institutions". Ideology is intrinsic to



the functioning of propaganda and hence media manipulation. Ideological biases within media outlets can greatly influence how political events are framed and portrayed. Media acts as a filter through which citizens perceive the world around them; however this filter is often tinted by the ideological leanings of these media organizations (Lippmann, 1922).

Propaganda through media manipulation can be particularly influential among individuals who strongly align with ideologies. Research conducted by Levendusky (2013) suggests that people who hold strong and emotionally charged ideological beliefs are more susceptible to partisan propaganda that aligns with their existing views. This confirmation bias reinforces their preexisting beliefs and can contribute to increased polarization, within society. In societies where religion is a powerful force, propagandists may exploit religious symbols and narratives to advance their agendas. Similarly when it comes to nationalism, propaganda often stirs up a sense of shared identity and a perceived threat from outsiders thereby reinforcing divisions in beliefs (Zaslave, 2008). Over the last four decades, the Bhartiya Janta Party's has evolved as a formidable national force driven by its unwavering dedication to religiously-rooted 'Hindu' Nationalism and unapologetic pursuit of identity politics that aims to establish a singular, exclusively 'Hindu' definition of Indianness rigidly delineate Indian identity from the secular ideals of the founding fathers of the nation (Mirchandani, 2018).

The BJP's origins can be traced back to the RSS, which was formed in 1925 and has since played a central role in crafting the narrative (Jaffrelot, 1996). Influential thinkers like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar contributed to the ideation of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism that argued that Hindus, though constituting a numerical majority, necessitated affirmation of their cultural and religious identity and domination on the country. For example, 'Hindu khatre mein hai' (Hindus are in danger) remains a persistent force in all narratives that advocate the agenda of Bhartiya Janta Party. Proponents argue that it safeguards Hindu heritage, but critics see it as a divisive tactic aimed at concentrating power. Supporters of Hindutva see secularism as a kind of appeasement of religious minorities, most notably Muslims. Hindus have deep scars in their collective memory resulting from the Partition of India in 1947, which culminated into the creation of Pakistan as an independent Muslim nation. Some Hindutva proponents view secularism as a response to the communal violence that accompanied partition, leading to the perception that it prioritizes minority interests over those of the Hindu majority (Ghosh, 2011). Among the key advantages of this narrative for the BJP is the capacity to solidify the Hindu electoral base. The narrative helps in propagating the divisive rhetoric of "us" vs "them" and it reinforces the idea that Hindu culture and traditions are under attack by the minorities or anyone who supports them. By framing Hindus as a vulnerable majority, the party positions itself as their protector and galvanizes them around a unified goal of establishing a majoritarian rule in the form of a Hindu Rashtra, highlighting the urgent need to not just preserve but assert their cultural values and religious beliefs with nationalistic pride. This emotional appeal has been successful in mobilizing a significant section of the population who feel a deep connection to their religious and cultural identity. Another benefit is that polarizing and hateful narratives are strategically used to shift the focus away from other pressing issues. The "us vs. them" mentality and the demonizing of minorities often shifts the public discourse away from economic and governance issues, focusing instead on identity-based concerns. This redirection of discourse benefits the BJP's political agenda, thereby saving them from accountability. Indian media plays an important role in amplifying the divisive narratives through media manipulation. With the unprecedented amount of money and resources on hand BJP has been successful in creating a media ecosystem which involves a combination of media outlets, including television networks, print media, news websites, and social media influencers, that promote their ideological agenda and narratives.



## II.LITERATURE REVIEW

**Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts (2018)** describe the American right-wing media ecosystem, characterized by outlets such as Breitbart and Fox News. It unveils a feedback loop wherein agenda setting, framing, and priming are employed to shape public opinion, often through the propagation of disinformation and partisan falsehoods. This insular ecosystem amplifies specific narratives, leading to polarization and the manipulation of beliefs.

**Marwick and Lewis (2017)** discuss 'Media manipulation', a pervasive and complex phenomenon in the digital age, involves the strategic use of various techniques to shape news frames, set agendas, and disseminate specific ideologies. It encompasses a range of practices aimed at influencing public opinion, news narratives, and agendas through strategic control and dissemination of information.

Marwick and Lewis describe it as a multifaceted phenomenon that involves the circulation of content to push specific worldviews, often utilizing mainstream media to amplify its reach. The actors engaged in media manipulation deploy various tactics, including spreading disinformation, creating hoaxes, and strategically framing news stories.

Media manipulation is facilitated by four core motivations that drive manipulators

1. **Ideology:** One primary motivation for media manipulation is ideological commitment. Actors are often driven by a desire to share and spread their beliefs, especially when they perceive a cultural or political threat. The far-right, for instance, engages in online participation as a means to counter left-wing cultural dominance, using the internet to establish counter-narratives.
2. **Money:** Financial gain serves as another powerful motivator for media manipulators. During significant events like the 2016 US election, actors purposefully spread factually inaccurate or deceptive content, often driven by profit rather than a specific ideological agenda.
3. **Status and Attention:** Gaining status and acceptance within online communities motivates certain actors to engage in media manipulation. Social media platforms incentivize users to create content that resonates with their peers, reinforcing the manipulator's status within the community.
4. **Radicalization:** The radicalization of individuals is another motivation. Far-right movements exploit rebellion against "political correctness" to spread ideologies like white supremacy, Islamophobia, and misogyny through irony and internet culture.

The techniques employed by media manipulators are diverse and strategic, reflecting a nuanced understanding of the media landscape.

1. **Participatory Culture:** Media manipulators actively participate in a culture of collaboration and knowledge-sharing. They share literature and texts to understand media dynamics better, cementing their identities as informed participants in the digital landscape.
2. **Bots:** Social bots, software designed to create content and interact on social media, are extensively used in media manipulation. Bots amplify content, spread misinformation, and influence political discourse, contributing to the overall manipulation of public opinion.
3. **Strategic Amplification and Framing:** Description: Manipulators strategically amplify content by trading stories through various media outlets. This involves planting stories with local news outlets, and if successful, the stories get covered by mid-sized and national news outlets, influencing public agendas.
4. **Memes:** Internet memes, both visual and textual, are strategically created and shared to spread ideologies. These memes, often humorous or provocative, serve as a means to reach wider audiences and influence public discourse.



5. Networks: Manipulators form agile networks, assembling and disassembling teams for campaigns as needed. This collaborative approach allows for effective dissemination of content and the ability to influence discussions on various platforms.

Marwick and Lewis offer a comprehensive exploration of media manipulation and disinformation online, unraveling the motivations, techniques, and collaborative efforts of diverse actors that enable manipulation in USA.

### **Media Manipulation in India**

In India, Media Manipulation is characterized by a full-fledged Media Ecosystem which includes ideologically-leaning hyper partisan media that generate media hype through selective exposure which is in turn amplified through social media echo chambers. This is processed by a selected audience on the basis of their socio-political identity.

### **Hyper-Partisan Media**

Some Indian TV news channels have acquired the nickname "Godi Media" (lapdog media), signifying concerns regarding their perceived political affiliation, unfair reporting practices, amplification of manipulated information, silencing of alternative viewpoints, and division of their audience along partisan lines. In contrast, the term "Lutyens Media" refers to media personnel, especially journalists and commentators, who are perceived to be part of the elite, often residing in areas like Lutyens' or Khan Market in Delhi, which is considered a posh and influential neighborhood. Lutyen's media is considered ideologically left-liberal in contrast with the alt-right Godi Media.

Journalists like Burkha Dutt (Freelancer/Occasional columnist with Hindustan Times and The Washington Post), Rana Ayyub (Washington Post), Rajdeep Sardesai (currently employed with India Today Group), Prannoy Roy (NDTV), Sagarika Ghose and Shekhar Gupta (The Print), Siddharth Vardarajan (The Wire) and other websites like Scroll, Newslaundry, Newslick etc are all considered secular-left/Left-liberal/Lutyens media. While journalists like Rajat Sharma (India TV), Arnab Goswami (Republic TV), Sudhir Chaudhry (Aaj Tak/Zee News), Rubika Liyaquat (Bhart 24), Suresh Chauhanke (Sudarshan TV), Amish Devgan (News 18) including publications like OpIndia and Swarajya openly align with the nationalist-right/Godi media. The perception is that these channels have been labeled (left/right) because they are seen as ideologically polarized and close to or against the governing administration. While the Godi media is criticized for closely aligning with the government of the day and uncritically promoting its policies and agenda, Lutyens' Media has been criticized for being overly critical and negative of the government's policies and selective in the interest of the oppositional narratives. In either case, the phenomenon has led to the belief that media outlets have shifted their focus away from impartial reporting and toward promoting a particular political stance. The consequence of expressing differing opinions or criticizing the powers could result in marginalization of some channels or job loss for some journalists. On the other hand, by catering to audience members whose beliefs align with certain controversial stances, some channels have created a following for their brand of journalism which is most beneficial in terms of revenue and TRPs. They are often criticized for prioritizing sensationalism and dramatic debates over engaging in informative and thoughtful content.

In Indian media landscape, we would observe that the mainstream media channels with highest viewership are pre-dominantly right-leaning. The left-leaning news channels lag far behind in terms of popularity and viewership. Major TV channels like Times Now, Aaj Tak, Republic TV, Zee News, News 18, and India TV are openly pro-government or aggressively nationalistic and specialize in hyper-partisan content. Hyper-partisan content is "extremely colored and 'openly ideological' reporting and editorializing from a far end of the political spectrum." In essence, hyper-partisan content is characterized by its strong ideological bias, often aligning with



a specific political or ideological viewpoint (Niederer and Rogers, 2020). Media outlets, particularly those with clear ideological leanings, have the potential to amplify messages in favor of specific institutions or political ideologies. This is exemplified by hyper-partisan channel Republic TV, which, according to a study of 1,779 prime-time debates, consistently champions the Prime Minister Narendra Modi government's policies and the BJP's ideology (Jaffrelot & Jumle, 2020). The channel, led by star anchor Arnab Goswami, has been accused of prioritizing narratives aligned with the ruling party rather than addressing critical issues impacting the Indian citizens.

The study found that nearly 50% of Republic TV's political debates criticized the opposition, yet not a single debate could be classified as favoring the opposition parties. The channel aired approximately eight anti-BJP debates for every 100 anti-opposition debates, showcasing a clear bias. In the lead-up to the 2019 elections, the channel intensified its anti-opposition debates, reaching a peak from February to April. Additionally, debates on crucial issues like agriculture, health, and the economy constituted only around one percent of the prime-time discussions. In contrast, the study compares Republic TV with NDTV which is seen to have dedicated a substantial portion of its debate content to political discussions, with 30.4% and 37.5% on debate and mixed shows, respectively. Anti-BJP debates were conducted by NDTV, directly criticizing Modi and other government office bearers constitute roughly 11% of the programming (Jaffrelot & Jumle, 2020). Republic TV's programming choices further reflect its ideological alignment. The channel conducted 54 debates on the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), with nearly 30% criticizing the Shaheen Bagh protest. Every other debate favored the ruling party's stance, showcasing a selective coverage that supports the government's narrative (Jaffrelot & Jumle, 2020). The channel consistently promoted hashtags that portrayed PM Modi in a positive light, contributing to the creation of a pro-government online discourse.

### **Media Hype and Selective Exposure**

According to Vasterman (2018), 'Media Hype' involves an intensified media attention to a specific event or an aspect of an event. This amplifies and accelerates news or events, leading to prolonged dominance in media and public conversation. The primary objective of generating media hype is to capture and maintain a high level of public interest and engagement. Hypes play a crucial role in driving audience engagement, readership, and online traffic for media organizations. Economic gains can be achieved by boosting ad revenue. Amidst heightened interest and attention, media outlets strive to solidify their position as go-to sources of information. Media hype can stem from both traditional sources and social media interactions. By incorporating embellishments, sensationalism, or emotionally charged language, stories mesmerize their audiences. Media Hype can be viewed as a subset of agenda setting. Media outlets play an active role in defining the public's attention by amplifying some stories and making them more prominent. Agenda setting at its most extreme, media hype strives to generate intense public interest and emotional responses (Vasterman, 2018).

### **Case Study – Corona Jihad**

Amidst the chaos and paranoia of Covid-19 pandemic in India, the demonization of the Muslim community through the widespread circulation of misinformation, fake or sensational videos, and the representation of Muslims as human bombs, national enemies, or terrorists in the media coverage of early phase of pandemic becomes an interesting case study. The Tablighi Jamaat congregation, held from March 13-15, 2020, was implicated as a super-spreader event, leading to the blacklisting of over 950 foreign nationals. The government accused them of violating emergency rules during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic was used extensively to spread Islamophobia in India by blaming the Muslim community for the spread of the virus. The Tableegi Jamat, a Muslim missionary movement, was blamed for organizing an event that led to the spread of the virus. It was reported that some attendees, who had traveled from outside India, tested positive for the virus. The Tableegi Jamat was blamed for organizing the event and ignoring the threat of the pandemic. This incident



provided a justification for the extremist right-wing elements to generate even more hatred against the Muslim community (Parry, 2020). The Indian government, through its daily press briefings, created a separate column for Tableegi Jamat-related cases, giving the impression that the Muslim movement was the main cause of the virus spread in India. This led to a general perception that all Muslims, not just Tableegis, were potential carriers of the virus. Consequently, Muslims were shunned and faced increased hatred from the masses. (Parry, 2020). The likes of Sudarshan TV with Suresh Chauhanke in the forefront and Zee News with Sudhir Chaudhary ran extensive programs on “Corona Jihad”. The term corona jihad was used to describe a conspiracy theory that accused Muslims of purposefully spreading the coronavirus (Parry, 2020).

The media focused exclusively on the Tablighi Jamaat event in Delhi and linked it to the spread of COVID-19, while ignoring the role of the government in allowing the event to take place and the lack of testing at airports (Vetticad, 2020). Various news programs, reports, and debates aired during the pandemic repeated unverified claims and misinformation circulated on social media, reinforcing narratives that Jamaat members were spitting, defecating radicals who, after defying government orders to hold religious congregations, went into hiding, abused health workers in quarantine centers, and are now putting the rest of the country at risk with their unruly behavior (Desai & Amarasingam 2020). This continuous coverage contributed to the communalization of the public health emergency, portraying the Tablighi Jamaat and Indian Muslims as contaminated, deceptive, and anti-national had real-life implications. Indian government, including the union government, its state arms, and other official agencies, along with elected representatives of the ruling BJP party, aided and amplified the misinformation campaign against the Indian Muslim community. Infact, even the government promoted the idea that members of the Tablighi Jamaat were to blame for India's COVID-19 outbreak. (Desai & Amarasingam, 2020)

### **Social Media Amplification and Creation of Echo Chambers**

In January 2020, a Reddit user known as 'u/onosmosis' conducted a comprehensive study, analyzing unverified Twitter accounts to identify trends in online propaganda and misinformation. The study, which focused on politically oriented accounts, revealed a substantial online presence for both Congress and BJP. However, a significant disparity emerged, with 2.7 lakh accounts supporting BJP and 1.2 lakh supporting Congress. Notably, the study identified 17,779 pro-BJP accounts engaged in spreading fake news, while the corresponding number for Congress was significantly lower at 147. This finding points to a systematic effort to manipulate online narratives, with a pronounced scale favoring the BJP. (Mihindukulasuriya, 2020)

In an alt-right media ecosystem, mainstream media and social media share a symbiotic relationship, due to convergence of technologies. What is presented on prime time TV debates is also published on the media channel's YouTube account and on the channel's official website. TV Anchors share snippets of the same via their social media accounts and in most cases have a daily hashtag to make a news item 'trend'. When a social media post goes viral on the internet, it also becomes newsworthy of the media channels who then broadcast it to a larger audience thereby lending it credibility. Social media manipulators use Twitter, Facebook and Whatsapp to amplify the message which enables a rapid transmission of information and the formation of echo chambers, where similar individuals bolster and intensify trends. Media outlets may strategically emphasize themes or narratives that appeal to their audience's preconceived notions, beliefs, or anxieties to create frenzy or media hype. Through amplification via hashtags, trending topics, and viral content, media hypes are fueled on these social. Direct consequences arise from a heightened focus, amplified media coverage – media hype, and a temporary transition in public conversation toward the subject of interest. Media outlets may reap short-term benefits in the forms of higher viewership, readership, and engagement. Misinformation, polarization, and selective exposure may result from indirect consequences. Exaggerated views or factual distortions may be the result of hypes. The media can create an exaggerated perception of reality, leading to the formation of echo



chambers where uniform perspectives are presented. Depending on the individual, media content can evoke varying responses, ranging from heightened engagement to increased skepticism (Vasterman, 2018).

Since March 28, 2020, hashtag #CoronaJihad appeared nearly 300,000 times and potentially reached to 165 million people on Twitter. On Twitter, 700,000 handles were involved in conversations with the said hashtag that has reached 170 million handles. #CoronaJihad alone had more than 250,000 interactions on Facebook since March 29, 2020. The #CoronaJihad hashtag is the manifestation of the idea that Muslims are weaponising the virus against Hindus. In other words, Muslims were painted as bioterrorists (Nabeel & Raashed, 2020).

### **Audience's Social Identity**

According to Dvir-Gvirsman's (2019) people view politics as an aspect of identity, and this perspective guides their choice of media. The study uncovered a correlation between political beliefs and media consumption habits, revealing that those with a strong political identity tend to favor content that supports their views. Research indicates that individuals typically gravitate toward news and data that align with their preexisting convictions and ideals. Depending on the political context, it could involve party or ideological divisions (e.g., left/right). This phenomenon is caused by the tendency for people to expose themselves to content that aligns with their social identity. This alignment serves multiple purposes, such as gathering information about the group, promoting a favorable view of the in-group, and maintaining self-consistency. People with a heightened political-social identity are more likely to exhibit selective exposure, given its significance in their self-perception. The preference for media consistent with one's political-social identity is more pronounced among those with a stronger identity. From business perspective, it appears that news channels may cater to the demand by airing content that a large part of their audience is likely to tune into and resonates with.

The concept of selective exposure as discussed by Vasterman (2018) suggests that individuals deliberately seek out and consume information that conforms to their existing beliefs and personalities. He suggests that selective exposure can contribute to the escalation of media coverage during critical situations. In such situations, people with strong political or ideological convictions may actively seek and disseminate information that supports their beliefs, contributing to the amplification of sensational or distorted news.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

Legal proceedings were initiated against Tablighi Jamaat members, including foreign nationals, under the assumption that they violated COVID-19 guidelines. Despite 20 FIRs filed against 2,765 Tablighi Jamaat members across 11 states, not a single conviction has been secured. Despite initial accusations, courts across the country criticized the legal proceedings, often citing a lack of evidence and the malicious intent behind the prosecutions. Some courts and voices within the legal community called for a reassessment of the government's actions and an acknowledgment of the damage caused. A reflection on the scapegoating of Tablighi Jamaat members and a call for reconciliation and understanding were urged to mend the social fabric (Tripathi, 2020). The incident highlights the importance of responsible reporting, emphasizing the role of media in shaping public perceptions. Media outlets should exercise caution to avoid contributing to the stigmatization of any particular community during crises. When polarizing narratives from irresponsible journalism on TV and social media transcend into real-life through hate crimes and hate speech, it exposes the torn social and moral fabric of our communities. Hyper-partisan media channels with unabashed ideological affiliations play a pivotal role in shaping and forwarding narratives that help and support politicians whose allies own a stake in the ownership of these media channels. These outlets thrive on sensationalism, selective reporting, and intentional amplification of content that aligns with their ideological stance. The ensuing information disorder clouds the public sphere with distorted narratives, contributing to a fractured information landscape.





A strong democracy stands upon the balance of diverse ideological perspectives. Media manipulation disrupts the democratic functioning of the nation as politicians perpetrate polarizing narratives for political gains and media channels and social media channels amplify it for the sake of economic gains to exacerbate existing divisions in the society. Both capitalize on historical fault lines, religious and cultural differences, and socio-political weaknesses, amplifying discord for their individual benefit. For the citizens of the country, constant exposure to one-sided ideologically charged content via news channels, social media platforms and even Whatsapp can be detrimental in deepening the ideological divide between communities, sowing communal discord and polarizing the Indian society on the basis of religion and politics. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, “Eternal vigilance is price of liberty”. Public must be vigilant and cautious about content being shared on social media and other electronic media platforms in a democratic country like ours. They have to verify the news from multiple sources about its credibility. Now- a –days, fake news has become a menace. Vested interest media organizations may share and spread hatred among communities. If public remains vigilant then media’s role in bringing polarization can be reduced. Communal harmony is paramount for a developing country like ours. At the end of the day, country should develop and its proceeds have to be shared among the public irrespective of caste, religion, gender, race, language and political affiliation. According to Gunnar Myrdal noted economist and sociologist, said, if a country progresses economically, then communal, racial, gender and linguistic differences will come down drastically. As a result, media manipulation will have no effect on the public at large. Public awareness on media manipulation will curtail polarization by vested media outlets.

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